

1967

## Dedication: Dean Joseph O'Meara

William J. Brennan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/jomeara>



Part of the [Legal Biography Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Brennan, William J., "Dedication: Dean Joseph O'Meara" (1967). *1952–1968: Joseph O'Meara*. 25.  
<https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/jomeara/25>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law School Deans at NDLScholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in 1952–1968: Joseph O'Meara by an authorized administrator of NDLScholarship. For more information, please contact [lawdr@nd.edu](mailto:lawdr@nd.edu).

## DEDICATION: DEAN JOSEPH O'MEARA

Notre Dame Law School's solid reputation as the nation's best small law school doesn't owe that high distinction to the work of one man. But surely none more deserves recognition for his part than Dean Joseph O'Meara. He came as Dean in 1952 with a vision and a plan. His vision was that there were advantages in smallness that, if properly cultivated, would enable Notre Dame to train lawyers the equal of the best graduated from the big law schools. His plan was to use smallness to the best advantage. It involves discarding electives for a prescribed program of instruction. It involves a faculty that works as a team, teaching not by lecture but by Socratic dialogue with students in classes of seminar size. It involves rigorous use of the case method only in the first year, succeeded in the second and third years by the problem method whereby students learn the law by using it to work out concrete legal problems. Probably the most distinctive feature is the system of comprehensive examinations based upon some or all of the courses completed by the student, expanding the base of successive examinations until the senior-year examinations take on something of the quality of a bar examination. The idea reflects an expression of Dean O'Meara's that I have often quoted:

The complex phenomenon which lawyers know as law is an always unfinished product. It may be compared to a tapestry, the weaving of which is never done, which repeats many of the patterns of the past but is constantly adding new patterns and variations on old patterns. Every lawyer, whether on or off the bench, has a part in the weaving of this tapestry and in the process is confronted by an endless succession of questions for which there is no simple, ready-made answer. In every case there are problems of appraisal, evaluation and choice which — whether practitioner or judge — a man must somehow resolve for himself.

The program is stern, hard medicine; but among other admirable characteristics, Dean O'Meara is a stern, hard — but scrupulously fair — disciplinarian with an abiding hatred of sham and only scorn for hypocritical amenities. He has a willingness, even an eagerness, to stand on his own feet and fight the ancient enemies — compromise, prejudice, base expedients. He is too modest but he might say with Cyrano, "I plume myself with independence and straightforwardness." His program awakens students to the stern fact that legal problems do not come labeled; disciplined as the program is, its great virtue is that it forces students, regardless of course label, to bring all relevant knowledge acquired in earlier courses to the solution of the particular problem presented. This contribution to legal education has enormous potential importance for all law schools, big and small. If the program mirrors Dean O'Meara as a perfectionist, intolerant of the mediocre, who will deny the desirability, even necessity, for such stern medicine to equip lawyers adequately to cope with the increasingly complex legal problems of an increasingly complex society?

But Dean O'Meara's vision did not stop with a creative program to train able lawyers. He also saw that the law school must play its part in creative jurisprudence. He established the *Natural Law Forum*, recognized today as this country's leading jurisprudential publication. In addition, under his leadership Notre Dame has probably done more for the advancement of understanding and

## NOTRE DAME LAWYER

progress in the vital areas of civil rights and civil liberties than any other law school, regardless of size. The timing of his symposia took courage, for usually they were held when emotions were at white heat and reasoned debate difficult to stage. Characteristically, he proceeded unperturbed and succeeded. These symposia attracted the nation's finest legal scholars, and the reports of those proceedings are basic documents in the areas involved.

I view Dean O'Meara's retirement with mixed emotions. It is selfish to deny a good friend the respite of a richly earned retirement and, of course, he has my sincere and affectionate good wishes for all good health and happiness in it. Yet, I hope we may have the benefit of his extraordinary talents some of the time. Not Notre Dame alone, but the profession which admires him so much, still needs him.

*William J. Brennan*  
*Associate Justice, The Supreme Court of the United States*